

GUN MAKING

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SUTTON AND MILLBURY.



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BY

ASA H. WATERS.

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## GUN MAKING.

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Among the pioneer families which first came to subdue the primeval forests of Sutton, were four bearing the name of Waters; two brothers, Nathaniel and Richard, and two sons of the former, Nathaniel, second, and Jonathan.

It may perhaps with truth be said that few families have left here more foot-prints on the sands of time or more numerous descendants. They came from Salem about 1720, a full half century before the revolution, and on referring to the early records of that ancient town, it is found that Nathaniel and Richard were of the third generation from Richard Waters, the progenitor and *terminus a quo* of all who bear the Waters name or lineage in this region.

Richard, the progenitor, emigrated from England about 1632, twelve years after the Mayflower, was a contemporary of Governor Winthrop, and probably came about the same time, as in a letter to his wife he speaks of a man by the name of Waters, as being a member of his household. Richard was by profession a gun manufacturer; married the daughter of a gun maker, and it is a noteworthy fact that the business of gun making has been hereditary in some branch of the Waters families almost continually since. From the original stirp, Richard, down to the present time, they trace their genealogy by official records in an unbroken line through nine generations.

Nathaniel, grandson of Richard, was one of the original proprietors of the Sutton township, owning one-tenth of



(estimated) thirty thousand acres, which he bought February 14, 1715. He married in Salem, Elizabeth, sister of Wm. King, who was also an original proprietor, and they formed a colony of emigrants from Salem to Sutton about 1716. Nathaniel afterward removed to Salem, where he died in 1718. He left eight children, of whom four with their families removed from Salem to Sutton in 1739; two sons, Nathaniel, second, and Jonathan, and two daughters, Ruth, wife of Benjamin Marsh, and Elizabeth, wife of Isaac Cook.

Nathaniel, second, settled in North Sutton, now West Millbury, upon the farm belonging to the heirs of Captain Amasa Wood; but the estate did not long remain in the family line.

Jonathan, who inherited much the largest portion of his father's estate, settled upon the farm now owned and occupied by Jonathan E. Waters, and it has remained in the continued possession of a Jonathan Waters for four generations.

Jonathan, first, had ten children, of whom two sons, Asa and Andrus, inherited the mechanical talent of their progenitor, Richard.

When the revolutionary war broke out, they were at once called into requisition. There were no national armories, and few, if any, private ones of much account. Guns were scarce, gun makers more so, and neither could be imported. To supply the great demand, Asa and Andrus erected on the Singletary stream a gun factory or armory, which they fitted up with tools and machinery for making guns by *water-power*. Hitherto they had been made mostly by hand-power, both here and in England. Steam-power had not been introduced. Even the barrels were made in England by hand-power, and the process of making them by motive power was not discovered till the next generation of this family, as will appear farther on. Water-power, however, was used in this armory to aid in the manufacture, and so far as we can learn, was here first introduced for that purpose—it being long before it came into use in England.

These brothers early discovered, what has proved to be true to the present day, that the best iron for gun barrels lay in the mines of Salisbury, Connecticut. They obtained it there in pigs, had it carted through the forests to a forge in Douglas, where it was converted into refined iron, and carted thence to their armory in North Sutton, where it was wrought into the various parts of the gun. Andrus died in about two years, from exposures at Salisbury, and was buried at West Point. He possessed uncommon mechanical genius, and his death, occurring when the country was in such urgent need of his services, was deplored as a public calamity.

Asa was thus left alone to pursue the business, which he did with vigor and success through the whole period of the war.

It is a tradition, highly probable, that he received the support and patronage of the State.

On a site next above his armory the State erected a large powder mill, which was the one referred to in the resolve passed by the Massachusetts Council, October 18, 1776.

“Resolved, that Mr. Nathan Putnam be appointed as the committee for building a powder mill at Sutton, in the room of Colonel Holman (who was called away to the field), and that the further sum of two hundred pounds be paid out of the public treasury of the State to the aforesaid committee to enable them to carry on the building of said mill.”

This mill had a long row of pestles and mortars on each of its four sides, and was run by water-power. Mr. Waters had the charge of it, and was often heard to say “there was hardly a barn in Worcester county under which he had not bent his back to scrape up saltpetre.”

Asa Waters, second, born November 2, 1769, was quite as much distinguished as his father for his mechanical and inventive talents, and he was constantly engaged in the armory business most of his life. Congress having established two national armories, one at Springfield and one at



Harper's Ferry, passed a law in 1808, appropriating \$200,000 annually for furnishing arms and equipments to the different States. For this purpose they selected six well known mechanics, among whom were Eli Whitney of New Haven and Asa Waters of Sutton; to whom contracts were issued from time to time, for a term usually of five years. In that same year of 1808, Asa and his brother Elijah erected on the Blackstone River, below the Singletary, the armory building, which still remains in the Armory village of now Millbury, and hence its name. Elijah died a few years after, leaving Asa to prosecute the business alone, which he did with energy and success, and he was continued in the contract service of the United States until the day of his death, which was December 24, 1841.

His armory was in active operation and of useful service in the war with England in 1812, and its business was largely increased by the manufacture of scythes, saw mill saws, smelting iron, cast steel, etc. Mr. Waters at the time of the separation of Millbury from Sutton, in 1813, was forty-four years of age. He was therefore essentially a product of Sutton, and it may not be considered out of place if a few more incidents of his life and his armory are given in these pages.

While in the contract service of the United States he introduced various improvements, among which were two which completely revolutionized the English mode of making gun barrels, which was to weld them by hand, and then grind them by hand before a revolving stone. Mr. Waters invented a process of welding them by power under trip-hammers, by which the work was done much better, quicker and cheaper.

It was adopted at all the armories in the United States, by many in Europe, and is still in use. He took out a patent, October 25, 1817, and his claim to originality *has never been disputed*.

Grinding them down was found to leave the metal of unequal thickness, and the barrels liable to explode. In



December 1818 he took out a patent for turning them in a lathe. In this he succeeded until he came to the irregular shape of the butt; there he was completely foiled, and so were the most ingenious mechanics in all the armories.

At last, in sheer desperation, he sent for a young man living in a border farming district, of whom he had heard as having some genius for mechanics. When he came he seemed a stranger to all present, appeared uncouth and awkward, had a stammering tongue, and little was expected of him. But he had no sooner glanced his eye over the machine, and seen what was wanted, than he suggested an additional but very simple motion, which relieved the difficulty at once, and proved a perfect success. It was adopted at all the armories in the United States, and has been in constant use ever since; and as it saves more than half a dollar on each gun, some estimate may be formed of its value to this country. This verdant youth, then called "Stammering Tom," was none other than the now famous Thomas Blanchard, whose inventive genius has rarely been surpassed in this or any other age. It was then and there, as he afterwards said, that he first conceived the idea of his world renowned machine for turning irregular forms, such as gun stocks, shoe lasts, tackle blocks, spokes, busts, and so on *ad infinitum*, and it was here he exhibited his first model.

Mr. Waters was the founder of Millbury bank. He obtained its first charter, and was for many years its first president. He was also the founder of five water privileges on the Blackstone, as follows: the Berlin mills, the sash and blind works of C. D. Morse, the Atlanta mills or old armory, the Cordis mills, and the Wilkinsonville mills, for all of which he built the dams and canals, except for the Berlin mills. This he saved from its threatened utter obliteration, by purchasing it of the Blackstone Canal Company, at the time the canal was abandoned and the lands reverted to their original owners. For his moral and general character reference is made to his "obituary," written by Dr. Buckingham, then of Millbury, now of Springfield, and published in the

Worcester *Palladium* soon after his death, December 24, 1841.

After his death, his son, Asa Holman Waters, who was also born in Sutton, carried on the armory business till the expiration of the United States contract with A. Waters and son, January 1, 1845, when the business came to a sudden, abrupt and almost final termination, and not of this armory alone, but of all the private armories in the United States service, of which there were six.

These armories were established under a law of Congress, passed in 1808, which has never been repealed, unless recently; they had been repeatedly recognized by the secretaries of war, from John C. Calhoun down, as a part of the United States system of supplying arms, and the duty of sustaining them had been repeatedly enjoined upon Congress. The owners, therefore, had regarded them as permanent establishments, and had invested largely in tools and machinery, which were nearly worthless for any other purpose. This sudden and untimely surcease was a great disappointment, a great injury, and an act of eminent injustice to the contractors, and also to their workmen, who had become expert on certain parts, knew no other trade, and had settled down in comfortable homes near the armories. Their vocation was gone. The real cause of this unjust act was for some time concealed. When the contractors remonstrated to the chief of ordnance, Colonel George Talcott, he said "it was done in obedience to instructions from the Honorable Secretary of War." This honorable secretary was Wilkins of Pennsylvania, who soon after retired from the office, and when inquired of why he issued the order, said, "he did not know he had; that Talcott sent in so many papers it was as much as he could do to sign them; he had no time to read them."

The condition of things at the department appeared to be, that while honorable secretaries were coming and going every few months, Talcott remained there in permanence; had been there many years, and had become a perfect autocrat



in the office. The only use he had for honorable secretaries was to sign his papers, and if any complaint arose, his uniform reply was, "Done in obedience to instructions from the Honorable Secretary of war," thus making the secretary the scape-goat for all his sins. But a terrible retribution came at last.

When President Polk came into power, he appointed as secretary of war a lawyer from New Orleans by the name of Conrad, whose knowledge of war office business was confined chiefly to the "code and pistols for two." He took the customary round of visiting the armories and arsenals, and wherever he went he noticed vast stacks and pyramids of cannon ball. On his return he sent a simple order to (now) Gen. Talcott to issue no more contracts for cannon ball.

Not long after, among the papers sent in for him to sign, he happened to notice a new contract for cannon ball. He writes to Talcott to know why it was issued. Talcott replies in his usual style, "done in obedience to instructions," etc. Conrad answers that "so far from being in obedience, it was in disobedience to instructions," etc. Talcott, in reply, had the presumption to reaffirm his former statement. Conrad's ire was raised at once; said he did not know much about cannon ball, but on questions of veracity he was at home. Being in official station he could not challenge Talcott, and so he ordered him to be tried by court martial before a board of which General Winfield Scott was made judge advocate. Much more was proved on the trial than was expected. It appeared in evidence that General Talcott was the owner of a large iron foundry in Richmond, Virginia, devoted to making cannon ball; that it was in charge of his nephew, to whom he issued, from time to time, large contracts upon most favorable terms; that he had become very rich; was the owner of large blocks in Washington, where he was living in the style of an eastern nabob.

The mystery of the discontinuance of the private armories was now revealed. The moneys intended for their support found their outlet chiefly through this channel.

General Scott, with his high sense of honor, was greatly shocked that a government official so high in position, a graduate of West Point, a Brigadier-General in the army, and chief of the ordnance department, should be found guilty of such corrupt embezzlement. His sentence was terribly severe, almost without precedent. In brief, it was that General Talcott should be removed from the office of chief of ordnance; be deprived of his commission of Brigadier-General; his name erased from the roll of army officers, and he sent in disgrace out of Washington.

The surviving contractors had thus the satisfaction of seeing the author of their great wrongs brought to condign punishment, but not of having their business reinstated. The system had been broken up, and most of the armories converted to other pursuits.

When the late civil war broke out, the government were surprised to learn that the retiring secretary of war, Floyd of Virginia, had surreptitiously sent down south nearly all the arms contained in northern arsenals, and they had but one armory left — Springfield — to supply the instant demand.

In this emergency they stretched out their arms imploringly to the private armories to resurrect them, but they were all dead, utterly dead, but two, which had barely survived. These were Waters' of Sutton, now Millbury, and Whitney's of New Haven. These were at once resuscitated, greatly enlarged, and given all the work they could possibly do. As the prices paid were liberal, they at last obtained some just compensation for the wrongs they had suffered.











